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Erasmus of Rotterdam
And
Martin Luther:
FREE WILL & PREDESTINATION
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Humanities 323A

Father O'Neill

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Man himself is something good in so far as
he is man, for he can live rightly when he
so wills. - Saint Augustine 1

The LORD looks down from heaven
upon the children of men,
to see if there be one who is wise
and seeks God.
All alike have gone astray; they have
become preverse;
there is not one that does good,
not even one.
- Psalm 14:2-3

The question of Predestination and Free Will is numbered
among those questions that cause many Christians to blush when
asked (or more ^{aptly} put: attacked) by skeptical intellectuals.
Because of this Christianity is not without individuals who have
taken pen in hand to defend the orthodox Christian viewpoint
concerning the existence of Pred^Sstination and Free Will. But
as it is with many of the other "doctrines of the Faith," these
well-intending authors often fall short of satisfying the human
intellect; or while trying to appeal to the intellect, they none-
theless confess that this matter exceeds the human capacity to
understand. Therefore this paper is not an attempt to resolve
the question of Predestination and Free Will (for that would
surely be a vain attempt) but rather to briefly present the ^{split} ~~infinite~~ ^{infinite} ~~infinite~~
opinions of these two men: Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther.
I would also like to answer the question as to why the latter
choose to depart from the orthodox teaching of the Church.

In my own personal dealing with the question of Predestin-
ation and Free Will I found it necessary to consult that wise
man of old, and authority equally recognized and honore^d by both
parties, Saint Augustine of Hippo. Our ~~dis~~ ^{dis}logue went something

like this (we were discussing whether, because of foreknowledge, God was responsible for our sin):

Aug.- Why do you think our free will is opposed to God's foreknowledge? Is it because it is foreknowledge simply, or because it is God's foreknowledge? Me- In the main because it is God's foreknowledge. Aug.- If you know in advance that such and such a man would sin there would be no necessity for him to sin. Me- Indeed there would, for I should have no real foreknowledge unless I knew for certain what was going to happen. Au.- So it is foreknowledge generally and not God's foreknowledge specially that causes the events foreknown to happen by necessity? There would be no such thing as foreknowledge unless there was certain foreknowledge. Me- I agree. But why these questions? Aug.- Unless I am mistaken, you would not directly compel the man to sin, though you knew before hand that he was going to sin. Nor does your prescience in itself compel him to sin even though he was certainly going to sin, as we must assume if you have real prescience. So there is no real contradiction here. Simply you know before hand what another is going to do with his own will. Similarly God compels no man to sin, though he sees before hand those who are going to sin by their own will. 2

This response interested me. Saint Augustine was saying, "Yes, God has a knowledge of the 'future' (we must understand that with God there is no past or future, just an eternal now) but that doesn't mean that he's the direct cause or author of our every act, no more than because you know that tomorrow it is going to rain means that I am going to make it rain."³ This explanation was very convincing until my mind ^{hit on?} wandered upon a rock left uninvestigated. It seems that the analogy between God and I breaks down when one realizes that I may know that tomorrow ^{will} bring ^{me} rain but I had no part in creating the clouds or their given natures.

I may know for a fact that "so and so" is going to sin in exactly thirty-five minutes, just as God knows, but the implications of that knowledge is different between God and I. I did not create "so and so" or assign to him a certain nature.

Is it not, therefore, contrary to God's loving nature to create an individual with the knowledge as to whether the individual shall ever enter into salvation? Would it not be better that God's will be programmed into our nature? Is he not withholding a blessing from us by creating us with a sin nature?

But God did not withhold the lavisness of his bounty even from his creatures who he knew before hand would not only sin but would continue in the will to sin; for he showed it in creating them.

- Saint Augustine 4

In response to the accusation that God created man with a sin nature Augustine teaches that man in his present state is not perfect man created by God, but fallen man blemished by original sin.⁵

Again, just as with the first hypothesis, if one is not careful and fails to take a close look at this hypothesis then one runs the risk of blindly accepting its conclusions. What's wrong with this hypothesis is that it fails to realize that God as first creator is in some way responsible for his creation. If in creating he is conscious of its results and repercussions he is then, in essence, condoning or consenting to those ends.⁶ The reason that I am going to such great lengths with this argument is, first of all, to disprove the idea that there is no Predestination; secondly that with the Creator, foreknowledge is

the same as Predestination and Predestination is the same as foreknowledge. This, in turn, resurrects the problem that Saint Augustine was dealing with: "How can God punish a man for sin if man sins only according to his nature which God foreknew when he brought man into existence?"⁷ The inverse of that question being: Can God reward man for a good act if man acts only according to his God-given nature? The next logical step then is to ask if man really has a Free Will or is he just blindly acting out the pre-ordained plan or will of God? If this is so then does God predestine some men to go to hell? (as in a la Calvin *too informal for a paper* theology).

Parmenides felt that for every distance ⁵ an individual travels he has to travel at least one half of the given distance before he can complete his journey. And in turn, he must travel one half of that half distance, then one half of that and so forth until it becomes obvious that for every movement one must first complete one half of the previous step. According to Parmenides' understanding the individual will never reach his destination but that there will always be one half of the distance to be traveled.⁸ Perhaps this is a weak example (~~this is sure a nice time to have doubts~~) *informal, destroys tone of paper.* but the idea that I am trying to convey is that for every answer presented concerning questions such as Predestination there will always ^{5 f} follow [?] two additional questions to be answered. This is certainly a poor note on which to start a ~~paper~~ *too personal* dealing with Predestination but I did it to graphically demonstrate just how awesome the controversy over Predestination and Free Will is.

un = awkward

However, when Luther decided to question the validity of the doctrine of Free Will his historical supporters could be numbered on one hand: John Wycliffe and Lorenzo Valla.⁹ In the minds of Luther's contemporaries there was no real question as to whether there was Free Will or not. *They had the problem of reconciling it with God's omniscience & predestination.*

There was a revival of learning taking place and through it attention was being paid to man's accomplishments in the arts and sciences down through the ages. Man was not a simple servant, sent into the fields to till the earth for God but he was a builder, a teacher and a thinker of divine thoughts.

The gods were not expectation to see him (man) in more shapes when behold, he was made into one of their own race, surpassing the nature of man and relying entirely upon a very wise mind... They begged Juno to let him into the stalls of the gods, unmasked, and to make him a spectator rather than an actor. She was already eagerly going about obtaining this of her husband, when, at that very moment man came out upholding the great Jupiter, the worthiest of gods, and with marvelous and indescribable gestures impersonating his father. He had transcended the characters of the lower gods and was piercing into that inaccessible light surrounded by darkness where Jupiter dwells, of kings and gods the king.

...The gods, out of respect for the image of the father of all gods, and by their own sufferage, unanimously decreed that divine honors be granted the man.¹⁰

(- Juan Luis Vives) belongs in the note.

It was a matter of necessity to the Humanists that man have Free Will. They wanted to depart from the binding ideologies of the Middle Ages. They wanted to rediscover through the classics and science the dignity of man. Their world view was that the universe is anthropocentric; the dignity of man is due to his various

not integrated into your paper.

accomplishment and his unique power to reason.¹¹ The ^{ES}Medieval view was that the universe is theocentric and that the dignity of man was dependant ^Son the belief that he was created in God's image-- it is a gift of God.

No one doubts that Erasmus of Rotterdam was a first-rate humanist.¹² But he differed from most of his humanist contemporaries because he was so concerned with the church, or as Roland Bainton put it: "...he was so Christian."¹³ Had there not been the Lutheran "Reform" ("reform" seems to be a weak word for what actually took place; "Upheaval" or perhaps "catastrophe" would be a more appropriate word) there certainly would have been an Erasmian Reform. *Erasmus makes this statement:*

Christianity has been made to consist not in loving ones neighbor, but in obstaining from butter and cheese during Lent...

Those who never in there lives endeavored to imitate Saint Francis' desire to die in his cowl... ^{OK}

By how many human regulations has the sacraments of penitence and cofession benn impeded? The bolt of excommunication is ever in readiness. The sacred authority of the Roman Pontiff is so abused by absolutions, dispensations and the like that the godly cannot see it without a sigh. Aristotle is so in vogue that there is scarcely time in the churches to interpret the gospel.¹⁴

~~(- Erasmus)~~

While Erasmus was very much concerned with the growing ostentatiousness of the church, not enough can be said about his desire to liberate men's minds from the shackles of superstition and of ecclesiastical censorship.

There is the story about John Pfefferkorn, a converted Jew,

*destrory
tone
There goes your A!
Proof read and
correct your
typing mistakes
& misspellings*

whose zeal for his new faith drew ^mhis to want all Hebrew literature burned (except the Old Testament, of course). This desire brought forth no cheers of joy from the mouth of John ^{Reuchlin}Reuchlin, an eminent jurist of Tübingen and a pioneer of Hebrew studies among the Christians. The controversy came to the ears of Emperor Maximilian who set up a committee to render an opinion. Reuchlin, as one of the members, advised that nothing be done indiscriminately and that chairs for the study of Hebrew be founded in the universities so that Christian^s might be competent to have a judgment. The Dominicans then rallied to the support of Pfefferkorn and brought the case before the Inquisitor for Heretical Pravity for the diocese of Colonge^{ogne}, Jakob von Hochstraten. He gave a judgement adverse to Reuchlin. An appeal was then made to the pope, who at first exonerated Reuchlin, but then, when the agitation continued, enjoined silence and saddled Reuchlin with the costs. But Reuchlin did not keep silent nor pay the costs. A victory had been won for free investigation. Erasmus immediately rallied behind Reuchlin not because he agree with his Cabalistic speculations, which Erasmus considered sheer fantasy, but because Reuchlin's actions represented man's freedom to think and to speak.¹⁵

Just as the Reuchlin episode was beginning to dissipate another controversy of similar nature rose up. The cause was the same: freedom to speak. The opponents were the same: the Dominicans. This time the controversy centered around a^rAugustinian monk's protest against the abusive practice of selling indulgences. The date was October 31st, 1517; the man was

Martin Luther.

Erasmus was very catu⁵ious about helping this young monk. Just as with Reuchlin, Erasmus supported Luther's desire to straighten out the church but he did not necessarily support Luther's views or methods.¹⁶ Erasmus later wrote:

Thus, then, did I favour Luther; I favoured the good that was in him, yet it was not him I favoured, but Christ's glory. And yet I saw much inside me that awoke my anxiety and suspicion, so when he approached me by letter of his own accord, I at once took the opportunity to admonish him and say what I wished him to avoid so that his mind, corrected and purified, might most fruitfully and to the great glory and service of Christ, reinstate for us the philosophy of the gospel, now almost moribund (frigescentem).¹⁷

It must be noted that Erasmus' relationship with Luther was one of amazing brotherly patience and compassion. Even when Luther ⁵slipped into "error" (the author's purpose is not to pass judgement, his is just to pass on the case) Erasmus was not sharp with threats of condemnation. His treatise "On the Freedom of the Will" is an example of this.

*underline
book
titles.*

Erasmus had successfully evaded the pleas of Luther's enemies to write against him for many years. Finally, however, in 1524 Erasmus took pen in hand and began his res⁵p⁵onse to Luther's paper "Assertio." ~~Even~~ still Erasmus's answer ha⁵ld no resounding defence of Rome and all its works, no challenge on the ground of Luther's innovations, no wholesale condemnation. It was a quiet examination of the Scriptural evidence for and against belief in Free Will, and he treated this excommunicated heretic as gently as if he had been a brother. This tone of conciliation

was in total harmony with Erasmus' ~~cosistent~~ ^{consistent} attitude in face of the ever-widening schism, but it infuriated both Luther and his enemies.¹⁸

Soon after receiving Erasmus' treatise "On Free Will" Luther published his reponse: "On the Bondage of the Will." It must be emphasized that when dealing with Lutheran material that the only criterion for truth is Holy Scripture. This ^{was to} ~~shall~~ have a lasting effect on almost all future forms of Protestant christianity. According to these churches: "If it is not in the Bible, it is not of truth."

Erasmus begins his Diatribe by pointing out his dislike of assertions. He does not look very highly upon people that are so attached to their own opinions that they vent ^{their} ~~with~~ rage and stop up their ears when some one presents an opinion different from their own. He feels there are far too many people in that position. So for that reason he plays the role of the debater and not the judge in his paper. That is, he will present his case, the scriptural evidence for and against Free Will, but he will leave the final judgement up to the reader.¹⁹

Luther responds in his treatise by writing that Christianity is full of assertions. He clarifies ^{by saying} ~~that~~ ^{words + deed} ~~facts~~ of the gospel when he speaks of things asserted. He says that a Christian must be willing to die for the truth of the gospel, not giving ground to vain arguments but remaining steadfast by the word of the truth of the gospel. Erasmus is then accused of being a lover ^{of} ~~of~~ peace more than a lover of truth. Luther claims that Erasmus is willing to down-play the truth if danger

of disagreement is present.20

Erasmus moves on to ask how one can bas^e his whole theology or dogma on scripture alone, seeing how obscure it is. He says that previous experience teaches one that the deeper he goes into scripture the darker and less ~~comprehensible~~^{comprehensible} it becomes. He says that it is not for man to ask the fundamental questions that have already been answered by the councils and the Church Fathers. He says that scripture itself proves this viewpoint: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority." (Acts 1:7)21

Luther retorts that that may be true in reference to the Parousia or the establishing of the kingdom (i.e., ~~eschatological~~^{eschat-} events) which Jesus is talking about in that verse (Acts. 1:7), but in all other aspects scripture is an "unsealed book" (Rev. 22:10). He confesses that to some people scripture is obscure, ~~But~~ the obscurity is not in the pages of Divine Writ, it is in the indolence of those who take a troubled look at the very clearest truth: "If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this world has blinded." (1 Cor4:3ff) 22

Erasmus objects, "If ~~cs~~^scripture is so clearly laid out that no interpreter is necessary then why have so many outstanding ~~men~~^{men} been caught blind (according to your teaching)? And if you say that the scripture is so clear to you because you have the Spirit then are you denying me ~~of~~ the Spirit also? Can such a multitude of witnesses (the councils, etc.) be wrong,"23

Luther wanders off and says that it is foolish to believe that scripture is obscure and even more foolish to turn to the papal court for an interpretation. He then goes on to write about the internal and external characteristics of scripture and how it can be used to determine truth.²⁴

Finally after countless hours of foreplay Erasmus settles down and starts writing about Free Will. He first gives his own definition of Free Will then he gives a scriptural reference:

^{22.}
A poer of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation.²⁵

- ~~Erasmus~~

When God in the beginning created man,
he made him subject to his own free choice.
If you choose you can keep the commandments;
it is loyalty to do his will.
There is set before you fire and water;
to whichever you choose, stretch forth your hand.
Before man are life and death,
whichever he chooses shall be given unto him.
- Sirach 15:14-17

Luther ~~easily~~ puts away Erasmus' little definition of Free Will but when it comes to answering the ~~Serach~~ text he gets trapped in a maze of words.

'Freechoice' means (strictly speaking) that which can do and does, in relation to God, whatever it pleases, uninhibited by any law or any sovereign authority. For you would not call a slave free, who acts under the sovereign authority of his master, and still less rightly can we call a man; when they live under the absolute sovereignty of God (not to mention sin and death) in such a way that they cannot subsist for a moment by their own strength.²⁶

- Martin Luther

Please check this for omitted words.

When, therefore, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) says: 'If thou wilt observe the commandments and keep acceptable fidelity forever, they shall preserve thee.' I do not see how Freechoice is proved by these words. For the verb is in the subjunctive mood ('If thou wilt'), which asserts nothing. As the logicians say: a conditional asserts nothing indicatively: for example, 'If the devil is God it is right to worship him; if an ass flies, an ass has wings; if Freechoice exists grace is nothing.' Martin Luther 27

Luther feels that when the question is placed: "If thou wilt" it is a conditional clause that calls for a negative answer. He does not take into consideration that four times within that passage man is offered a choice. It is foolish to say that God is toying with man by asking him to perform a task that he is incapable of doing.

It should be understood that the belief in God's Predestination rests on the belief that God is sovereign in his creation. If God is truly sovereign then he has the power to relax his sovereignty in order that man might exercise his free will. To say that God cannot do this is to deny God of his sovereignty to do whatsoever he pleases in his creation. 28

Luther then presented a passage from Scripture that was just as much for predestination as the Sirach text was for Free Will:

God has mercy on whom he wishes, and whom he wishes he makes obdurate.

You will say to me, "Why, then, does he find fault? For who can oppose his will?" Friend, who are you to answer God back? Does something molded say to its mold-er, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not a potter have the right to make from the same lump of clay one vessel for a lofty pur-

pose and another for a humble one? What if God, wishing to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels fit for wrath, ready to be destroyed, in order to make known the riches of his glory toward the vessels for mercy, which he prepared for glory-- I am speaking about us whom he called, not only from among the Jews, but from among the Gentiles. Romans 9:18-24

There is not much that Erasmus can do with this passage. He tries to trace the verse back to another passage that uses the same image, Jeremiah 18:6 and Isaiah 45:9ff. But in doing so he disregards the interpretation that Paul is obviously giving, that is, God's sovereign right to what ever he pleases with his creation. He tries to down-play that idea by saying that Paul was really just trying to quiet the impious complaint.²⁹ This is partially true. But nonetheless the statement is made: "Friend, who are you to answer God back? Does something molded say to its molder, 'Why did you make me into this?'" (Romans 9:20).

Erasmus concludes his Diatribe by going on a spree of retoric rhetorical questions. He appeals to reason in a question that he knows cannot be answered by reason. In his desire to appear without prejudice he make no further conclusions and leaves the matter of Free Will and Predestination up to the reader:

For when I hear that the merit of man is so utterly worthless that all things, even the works of Godly men, are sins, when I hear that our will does nothing more than clay in the hand of a potter, when I hear all that we do or will referred to absolute necessity, my mind encounters many a stumbling block...

...There is the further objection: What is the point of so many admonitions, so many precepts, so many threats, so many exhortations, so many expostulations, if of our-

selves we do nothing, but God in accordance with his immutable will does everything in us, both to will and to perform the same? He wishes us to pray without ceasing, to watch, to fight, to contend for the prize of eternal life. Why does he wish anything to be unceasingly prayed for which he has already decreed either to give or not to give, and cannot change his decrees, since he is immutable? 30

- Erasmus -

There is one thing that remains unanswered, "Why did Martin Luther go against a tradition that had been held since the time of Augustine?" To answer this question requires a little knowledge of Luther's early monastic life.

Some might say that Luther was overly conscious of his human limitations. Others might say that he is the result of dark Medieval teachings on goblins and evil spirits. But the fact remains that Luther desired to be free of ~~Dark Ages~~ ^{of the Dark Ages} Theology that shackled men's souls in damp hovels where God was judge. ^{He can't avoid this.} He saw man's deviant spirit up against a background of God's just demands. He tried every orthodox method to perhaps bridge the gap between himself and God, or at least to ward off God's judgement.

Luther would repeat a confession and to be sure of including everything, would review his entire life until the confessor grew weary and exclaimed, 'Man, God is not angry with you. You are angry with God. Don't you know God commands you to hope?'

This assiduous confessing certainly succeeded in clearing up any major transgressions. The leftovers with which Luther kept trotting in appeared to Staupitz to be only the scraps of a sick soul. 'Look here,' he said, 'if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive-- parricide, blasphemy, adultery -- instead of these peccadilloes.' 31

There are other Augustinian texts that assert the corruption of the will, due to original sin.

Luther was so enwrapped in continual striving that when, one day, God showered his grace upon him Luther was totally overcome. He now saw how vain all that striving had been. He could never bridge the gap by his own efforts. It was only by God's grace that he now felt clean before his Lord. Where once he only saw the drawn sword of God's judgement, he now saw the bare hand of Christ stretching out to all mankind, offering healing, offering hope, and offering complete forgiveness.

Like a foolish dreamer
 Tryin' to build a highway
 To the sky
 All my hopes would come tumblin' down
 And I never knew just why
 Until today when you pulled away
 The clouds that hung
 Like curtains on my eyes
 Will I've been blind
 All these wasted years
 And I thought I was so wise
 But then You took me by surprise.

Like wakin' up from the longest dream,
 How real it seemed
 Until Your love broke through.
 I've been lost in a fantasy
 That blinded me
 Until Your love broke through.32

He could ~~careless~~ care about his own free will. He was where he wanted to be. He knew that in God's hands he would always be safe and the best was always sought out for him.

His striving to know God symbolized for him Free Will, that is man trying to draw close to God. But God sending his saving grace symbolized to Luther God's predestined will. The awesome power of God's saving grace, the grace that Luther experienced, was such that it completely overshadowed his own effort. To Martin Luther his Free Will was swallowed up by

God's ~~Predestined~~ plan.³³

How deep are the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How inscrutable his judgments, how unsearchable his ways! For 'who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has given him anything so as to deserve return?' For from him and through him and for him all things are. To him be glory forever. Amen. - Romans 11:33-36

This is a well-researched paper - fairly clear and straight-forward, but the writing distracts to such a degree!

*Did you research it for a long period and then write it at one sitting?
Did you proof-read it?*

FOOTNOTES

¹Arthur Hyman, James J. Walsh, eds. Philosophy of the Middle Ages. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing co., 1973) p. 65

²Ibid., p.61

³Ibid., p.

⁴Ibid., p.63

⁵Ibid., p.17

*Ibid = same place -
Loc. cit. = in the cited work (then you give the page)*

⁶An important factor that I have not brought forth is the "why" question. If God did foreknow or predestine man's condition why did he give him freewill (if man in fact does have free will)? It is a universal principle that love must be given freely. Therefore if, as Augustine and other Christian writers say, man was created to love and to be loved by his creator, he must be free to give and to receive love. Hence man must have a "free will" to really fulfill that purpose. Had it been any other way we would be mere actors on a celestial stage reading predetermined lines and never really experiencing the purpose for which we were created: to be one with the Father.

⁷Hyman, p.65

⁸Dr. Howard Delaney, Pl 1980: Philosophy of Concern lecture notes, Loyola Marymount University, Fall semester 1976.

⁹Ernst Cassirer, et al. The Renaissance Philosophy of Man. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) pp.147-182

¹⁰Ibid., pp.389-390

¹¹Ibid., pp.215-254

¹²"Erasmus." The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, (Palo Alto: Amer. Heritage Pub. Co., Inc., 1973) p.444

¹³Roland H. Bainton. Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther. (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1950) p.96

¹⁴Ibid., p.97

¹⁵Roland H. Bainton. Erasmus of Christendom. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969) pp.151-152.

¹⁶Ibid., pp.153-154.

¹⁷Margaret Mann Phillips. Erasmus and the Northern Renaissance. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1949) p.169

FOOTNOTES (cont.)

¹⁸Ibid., p.186.

¹⁹E. Gordon Rupp, et al., eds. and trans. Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation. The Library of Christian Classic, Vol. XVII. (Philadelphia: the Westminster Press, MCMLXIX) p.38

²⁰Ibid., p.108.

²¹Ibid., p.38

²²Ibid., p.110

²³Ibid., pp.44-46.

²⁴Ibid., pp.158-159.

²⁵Ibid., p.47

²⁶Ibid., p.170

²⁷Ibid., pp.183-184

²⁸Joe Bustillos and Mike Lash, personal discussion on Free Will, Loyola Marymount University, October 18, 1977.

²⁹Rupp, Ibid., pp.70-72

³⁰Ibid., p.87.

³¹Roland H. Bainton. Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther. (New York: New American Library, Inc., 1950) p.41

³²"Your Love Broke Through" written by Keith Green, Todd Fishkind, and Randy Stonehill, off of Keith Green Album For Those Who Have Ears To Hear. Sparrow Records, 1976.

³³To Jesus Christ be all glory and honor forever! Amen.

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